

THE COMPLETE FEININGER: THE SCHIRN IS DEDICATING AN EXTENSIVE RETROSPECTIVE TO LYONEL FEININGER'S SURPRISINGLY MULTIFACETED OEUVE

LYONEL FEININGER RETROSPECTIVE

OCTOBER 27, 2023 – FEBRUARY 18, 2024

The German-American artist Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956) is a classic protagonist of modern art. The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating an extensive retrospective to the important painter and graphic artist—the first in Germany in twenty-five years—thus providing an in-depth and surprising overall picture of his work. Feininger is known for his paintings of buildings, which are crystalline architectures with an unmistakable monumentality and harmony of color. The reception of his work today, however, often overlooks the originality and abundance of artistic facets in his oeuvre, which reflects numerous tendencies of modernity. Several seemingly opposing interests run through his work with great continuity and are part of his distinct signature. The Schirn is presenting rarely shown works like *The Cyclists* (1912), *Self-Portrait* (1915), *Zirchow VII* (1918), *Gelmeroda XIII* (1936), and *Manhattan I* (1940), but also lesser-known works such as the artist's photographs, which were just rediscovered a short time ago. Feininger already developed his very own style as a graphic artist and caricaturist at an early point in time. Besides central works from the early figurative phase with political caricatures, humorous-grotesque city views, and carnivalesque figures, the exhibition also sheds light on his role as a teacher at the Bauhaus and a master of graphic techniques like drawing and the woodcut. A special focus is put on the artist's exile in the United States, with central works from this period. With roughly 160 paintings, caricatures, watercolors, woodcuts, photographs, and objects, the exhibition highlights important topics and lines of development that shaped Feininger's work and make it unique.

For the presentation, the Schirn was able to obtain important loans from numerous German and international museums, as well as public and private collections, and bring them together in Frankfurt. The lenders include, among others, the Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin; Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge, MA; Museum Lyonel Feininger, Quedlinburg; Kunstmuseum Basel; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museo de Arte Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum Folkwang, Essen; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Sprengel Museum Hannover; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie; Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

The exhibition "Lyonel Feininger: Retrospective" is supported by the Hessische Kulturstiftung and the Ernst Max von Grunelius-Stiftung. Additional support comes from the Fraport AG, the Fontana Stiftung, and the Georg und Franziska Speyer'schen Hochschulstiftung.

Dr. Sebastian Baden, director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, emphasizes: "Lyonel Feininger is among the best-known representatives of classical modernism in Germany, but the many-sidedness of his art is nevertheless surprisingly unfamiliar to a broader audience. The extensive retrospective at the Schirn now offers a spectacular reconsideration of his oeuvre as a whole from sixty years of artistic work, with important and rarely shown loans from collections in Europe and the United States. In this unique show, the multifaceted character of his total body of work, which holds astonishing discoveries, becomes clear."

Dr. Ingrid Pfeiffer, curator of the exhibition, elucidates: “Lyonel Feininger’s outstanding body of work represents numerous currents in the art of the twentieth century in a highly exemplary manner, yet it is extremely individual. His artistic development does not take place linearly, but instead evinces numerous leaps and recourses to earlier topics. Feininger’s big themes simultaneously become visible across all mediums, extending up to his late work. His independent thinking is free of hierarchies, and the contradictory and the different are also tolerated. While it is often serious, constructed, and monumental at first glance, it is also an oeuvre full of surprises, profound melancholy, and playful lightness.”

TOUR THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

At the start of the large retrospective, the Schirn presents drawn and painted self-portraits by Lyonel Feininger, including the expressive *Self-Portrait* (1915), which was shown in 1917 at his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Der Sturm in Berlin. In this gesture of self-reflection, Feininger portrays himself both skeptically and contemplatively. After coming to Germany from New York in 1887 to study in Leipzig, Feininger ultimately decided to pursue the visual arts at the academy in Berlin. He had his first success here as a leading caricaturist and illustrator, with drawings that make it possible to recognize his special sense of humor. Beginning in 1896, he produced drawings for various satire magazines and newspapers like *Ulk* or *Lustige Blätter* and developed the comic series *The Kin-der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie’s World* (both 1906) for *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*. His early paintings were also figurative. The so-called carnival or “masquerade” pictures, with their characteristic color palette of muted rosés, toxic yellow, midnight blue, and turquoise green, were created during his stay in Paris and in the following years between 1907 and 1911. The figures depicted in dramatic, dreamlike scenes are often isolated-seeming “types”—workers, intellectuals, children, women, and men with elongated limbs and dressed in extravagant fashion that seems to have fallen out of time. In figurative paintings like *The White Man* (1907), Feininger took up the flat compositions of his caricatures, experimented with alienation, and thus opened up a new perspective on pictorial space.

Feininger developed his famed series of crystalline architectures—still today his best-known group of works—during the First World War and into the 1920s. As a result of the prismatic superimposition of surfaces, which call to mind the migration of light over the course of the day, the pictures were given an element of time, while the transparency embodies mental clarity and spirituality. Influential in this development was Feininger’s examination of Cubism, and in particular Robert Delaunay’s light-flooded and dynamic works as well as those of the Italian Futurists, as reflected in his major painting *The Cyclists*. In his prismatically broken-open and monumental architectures, Feininger attached particular importance to an Expressionistic, inwardly shaped vision. Rather than dissecting and providing multiple views of an object, he strove for concentration to an absolute extreme. Feininger, who was also a musician and composed pieces himself, compared his painting with the “synthesis of a fugue,” in which harmony and dissonance, as well as formal rigor and rhythm, find their place.

Still today, Feininger is regarded as one of the most important woodcut masters of the twentieth century. The majority of his roughly 320 woodcuts were created in a period of just three years, between 1918 and 1920, including the iconic *Cathedral* (1919), which is printed on the title page of the *Manifest und Programm des staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar* (Manifesto and Program of the State Bauhaus in Weimar, 1919). That same year, Walter Gropius brought Feininger to the Bauhaus as one of the first Masters, and he became the director of the printmaking workshop there in 1921. The Schirn is also showing drawings, etchings, and lithographs from Feininger’s extensive graphic oeuvre.

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The exhibition brings together a spectacular series of five paintings from various phases of Feininger's large series by the name of *Gelmeroda* (1913–55), on which he worked again and again over roughly forty years, in addition to one drawing, several woodcuts, and one lithograph. This makes it possible to trace in particular Feininger's enthusiasm for historically evolved, romanic architecture. His development is, however, in no way linear and comprises crystalline-Expressionistic and moving versions such as *Gelmeroda II* (1913) and, at the same time, majestic renderings with the principal motif striving upward in a cool bluish green, as in *Gelmeroda VIII* (1921). Feininger pursued another intensive examination of the city of Halle (Saale), characterized by old city buildings and massive sacred structures. From the group of works created between 1929 and 1931, the Schirn is showing *Church of St. Mary with the Arrow* (1930) and *The Cathedral in Halle* (1931), along with charcoal drawings, sketches, and photographs that he produced during his strolls through the city. In both series, Feininger's artistic approach to his motifs was based on numerous sketch-like preliminary drawings, his "nature notes," through which he approached his motif before realizing it in a painting.

In the late 1920s, Feininger intensified his examination of photography, even though he had taken a critical view of the medium for a long time, and left behind a collection of altogether roughly 20,000 photo objects, just recently rediscovered. The Schirn is showing photographs and slides by the artist, which take up central motifs like (display window) figures, locomotives, and architecture. He photographed the Bauhaus in Dessau at night in mysterious light, unlike any other Bauhaus photo. The medium served Feininger as an additional realm for experimenting with picture effects such as light-dark contrasts, shadows, and play with shapes, as well as blurring, which call to mind rhythmic elements in his paintings.

Feininger's wooden toys, as already his caricatures and comics, are also an inseparable part of his total body of work. Starting in 1913, he worked on locomotives of colored hardwood, which were to be made in series, a plan that could not take effect due to the First World War. With *City at the End of the World* (1925–55), he created a toy city of wood that reflects his interest in historical buildings and churches and makes reference to the novel *Die andere Seite* (The Other Side, 1908) by his friend Alfred Kubin.

Recurring thematically in Feininger's oeuvre are his sea works. The steamboats and sailboats on the Hudson River in New York had already fascinated him as a child, and, in Germany, his annual stay at the Baltic Sea offered him inspiration for additional motifs. Besides nearly abstract beach pictures with doll-like figures and surfaces fragmented in a Cubistic manner, like *Bathers (on the Beach I)* (1912), Feininger produced dramatic mystical paintings such as *Leviathan (Steamer Odin I)* (1917). The deserted, transparent sea pictures that he painted starting in the 1920s, and lasting well into his late work in the United States, represent the second renowned group of works in addition to Feininger's crystalline architectures. As in the church pictures, here he looked to nature for inner experiences with references to romanticism. Mysterious emptiness, solitude, subtle experiences with light, space, and clouds are recurring topics, as in *Calm at Sea III* (1929) or *Dune at Eventide* (1936), which call to mind Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Mönch am Meer* (The Monk by the Sea) or William Turner's seascapes.

Continuity and contrary tendencies continue in Feininger's late oeuvre. In 1937, after nearly fifty years, the artist, along with his Jewish wife, Julia, fled from National Socialist Germany into exile in the United States. His art was publicly defamed in the exhibition "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art), and over 400 works were confiscated from public collections. After two years in New York, Feininger resumed painting. With the help of his "nature notes," he took up earlier motifs in a new style and transferred to his new surroundings central compositions like towering canyons between

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buildings from *Church of the Minorites II* (1926) or from photographs of Halle into, for example, series of New York pictures like *Manhattan I* (1940). Feininger's earlier tendency toward working nearly (but not entirely) abstractly intensified in his late oeuvre, particularly in the series of skyscrapers in New York. This also applies to his photography, which is oriented more than before toward the abstract. Feininger occupied himself to a greater extent with color slides and once again took up familiar motifs and compositions from his work. By reexploring his painting *Broken Glass* (1927), he experimented with overlapping pieces of glass and light phenomena, which were continued on another visual level when the slides were projected.

The rarely shown series of watercolor and ink drawings, the *Ghosties*, was created a few years prior to his death in New York. They fathom the liberated lines of his late oeuvre and, similar to his caricatures and wooden toy figures, form a fascinating contrast to his monumental architecture paintings with their playful lightness.

DIGITORIAL® For the exhibition, the Schirn is offering a Digital® providing insights into the artistic world of Lyonel Feininger, with background information, art and cultural history contexts, and key exhibition content. The free digital educational offer can be accessed in German and English starting in October at feininger.schirn.de/en.

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main **DATES** October 27, 2023 – February 18, 2024 **INFORMATION** schirn.de **EMAIL** welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49 69 29 98 82-0 **TICKETS** in the online shop at schirn.de/shop and at the Schirn ticket office **ADMISSION** weekends €14, reduced €12, weekdays €12, reduced €10, free admission for children under the age of 8 **OPENING HOURS** Tues., Fri. to Sun. 10 a.m.–7 p.m., Wed. and Thurs. 10 a.m.–10 p.m. **BOOKING INDIVIDUAL TOURS** Individual or group tours can be booked at fuehrungen@schirn.de **VISITOR INFORMATION** at schirn.de/en/visit/faq **CURATOR** Dr. Ingrid Pfeiffer **CURATORIAL ASSISTANCE** Anna Huber **IN COOPERATION WITH** Achim Moeller, The Lyonel Feininger Project **MEDIA PARTNERS** Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, **VGF CULTURAL PARTNER** hr2 **SUPPORTED BY** Hessische Kulturstiftung, Ernst Max von Grunelius-Stiftung **ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM** Fraport AG, Fontana Stiftung, Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung

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